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From: Shoren Brown [SBrown@tu.org]
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Subject: fyi

BRISTOL BAY:

Begich supports EPA completing controversial watershed review

Manuel Quinones, E&E reporter

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Alaska Democratic Sen. Mark Begich says he supports U.S. EPA finishing its controversial watershed assessment of the potential impact of large-scale mining in southwestern Alaska, raising eyebrows among advocates who follow the debate.

While members of Alaska's congressional delegation are united in strongly opposing a pre-emptive EPA veto of the potential Pebble LP gold and copper mine in the Bristol Bay area, Begich's support for the agency's review -- albeit lukewarm -- is of note.

"I think EPA has to finish out their process, and we'll see where it lies from there," Begich said in a short interview. "They started it. We should let the process finish, and then we'll see where the information lies."

Pebble could become one of the largest open-pit mines in the world, near what EPA has confirmed to be the world's largest sockeye salmon fishery.

With polls released by mine opponents showing Alaskans deeply divided over the mine, Begich is taking a wait-and-see approach to EPA's intervention.

"While the project needs to meet a high hurdle -- protecting the world's largest and most valuable salmon run -- developers should be allowed to present their project and it should succeed or fail on its merits," he said in a statement. "I remain opposed to any pre-emptive decision on the Pebble mine."

Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R), ranking member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, has been critical of EPA's watershed assessment. Like state Attorney General Mike Geraghty, she has questioned whether EPA has legal authority to conduct it.

Even though Murkowski in recent statements has stopped short of calling on EPA to scrap the watershed assessment, spokesman Robert Dillon said the effort is useless if based on hypothetical mine scenarios.

Dillon said Murkowski supports an effort by Sen. David Vitter of Louisiana, top Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, asking EPA for more information about the assessment. In a recent letter, Vitter called on EPA to end the assessment and wait for the regular permitting process ([*E&ENews PM*](#), Feb. 21).

"While the proposed mining project is an Alaska issue, the issue of EPA pre-emptively vetoing development is a much bigger problem," Dillon said. "We support Senator Vitter's efforts and hope the EPA will provide full and timely answers to his questions."

The Livingston Group, founded by former Rep. Bob Livingston (R-La.), is one of Pebble's lobbyists on Capitol Hill. Vitter replaced Livingston after he retired from the House in 1999.

Alaska Rep. Don Young is also opposed to EPA's watershed assessment. He has called for Alaskans to decide the issue rather than outside factions.

Young press secretary Mike Anderson said, "The EPA Watershed Assessment is an entirely voluntary, contrived and costly exercise wholly outside the actual federal permitting process. Just one of EPA's peer-review sessions cost nearly \$170,000, or \$772 for each person in attendance."

He added, "At a time when federal agencies are being asked to do more with less, and before a permit application has even been filed, is this really an appropriate expenditure of EPA's time and taxpayer dollars?"

Earlier this month, EPA said it was revising the draft watershed assessment and submitting it for additional scientific peer review and public comment ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 6).

Supporters of efforts to protect the Bristol Bay area from pollution, including Native Alaska groups, are due to arrive in Washington, D.C., this week to lobby for strong and swift EPA action.

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